

Eric Robertson

University of Virginia
Department of Economics
PO Box 400182
Charlottesville, VA, 22904-4182

ericrobertson.github.io
enr2ac@virginia.edu

Citizenship: USA

Education

PhD Candidate, Economics, University of Virginia May 2026 (expected)
Committee: Sheetal Sekhri, Sandip Sukhtankar, Kerem Coşar, Gaurav Chiplunkar
Visiting Research Student, London School of Economics and Political Science Fall 2023, Spring 2024
MA in Economics, University of Virginia December 2021
BA in Economics & Mathematics, University of Virginia May 2017

Fields of Interest

Primary: Development Economics
Secondary: Political Economy, Environmental Economics, Economic History

Job Market Paper

“Economic Ideas and Policy Implementation: Evidence from Malthusian Training in British Indian Bureaucracy”

Abstract: Public officials often fail to implement government policy as directed, yet the role of economic ideas in shaping these implementation choices is poorly understood. This paper provides causal evidence that exposure to economic ideas can durably influence bureaucrat behavior. I study British colonial bureaucrats in India, exploiting a natural experiment created by the abrupt death of Thomas Malthus in 1834, replacing his economics instruction at a bureaucrat training college for that of a contemporary critic, Richard Jones. Whereas Malthus regarded economic distress as a natural mechanism for restoring equilibrium by reducing population growth, Jones disagreed with this view. Linking rainfall shocks to district-level fiscal responses, I show that officials trained by Malthus delivered less relief during droughts, providing 0.10-0.25 SD less aid across all major measures compared with officials taught by Jones. The results reveal that exposure to abstract economic ideas can shape real-world policy implementation for decades.

Working Papers

“The Salt Shock: Scarcity, Substitution, and Surprising Health Spillovers”
(with Sheetal Sekhri, Ramiro Burga, and Sisir Debnath)

Abstract: We study the long-run health impacts of a 19th-century colonial tax that sharply altered salt prices across a fiscal border in British India. To enforce the salt tax, the British built a 2,500-mile customs line, the salt hedge, which raised salt prices and limited access in eastern regions for several decades. Using a spatial regression discontinuity design around the historical hedge, we show that individuals east of the hedge, who faced prolonged exposure to salt scarcity, exhibit lower rates of hypertension and heart disease today. Historical archival records confirm sustained salt price gaps during the hedge’s operation (1836–1879), and contemporary consumption data reveal persistent differences in salt use across regions. Our results uncover a surprising health spillover from an extractive institution, driven by persistent behavioral adaptation in consumption. We highlight a novel pathway through which fiscal policies can leave a long-lasting imprint on health, even after the policy itself has abolished.

“Consequences of Elevated Fluoride Exposure for Cognitive Development ”
(with Sheetal Sekhri, Ryan Brown, Amzad Hossain, Emily Gonzalez, and Rajiv Gupta)

Abstract: We establish causal links between elevated fluoride exposure in drinking water and the cognition and health of children by leveraging local geogenic factors that generate fluoride variation in household-level drinking water. We consistently find that elevated exposure generates an 8-10% deficit in the general intelligence of children. In addition, the children exposed to high levels of fluoride in their drinking water also have less human capital accumulation, as measured by math and language proficiency tests, worse dental health, and suffer from important physical limitations. We conclude that environmental exposure to elevated fluoride leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of poverty: exposure affects children's cognition and health, leading to adverse inter-generational consequences, depressing economic mobility, and perpetuating inequality.

Work in Progress

“Competitive Selection and Bureaucrat Performance: Evidence from the end of Patronage in British India”
 “The Long Run Health Consequences of Early-Life Exposure to Fluoride: Evidence from Mexico”
 (with Sheetal Sekhri)

Presentations

Northeast Universities Development Consortium, Medford, MA	November 2025
Washington Area Development Economics Symposium, Washington, DC	April 2025
LSE Graduate Economic History Seminar, London, UK	May 2024

Teaching Experience

Teaching assistant, UVA:

<i>Environmental Economics (undergraduate)</i>	Spring 2025
<i>Economics of the Environment and Sustainability (undergraduate)</i>	Fall 2024
<i>Principles of Economics: Macroeconomics (undergraduate)</i>	Summer 2023
<i>Behavioral Finance (undergraduate)</i>	Spring 2022, 2023
<i>Theory of Financial Markets (undergraduate)</i>	Fall 2021, 2022

Fellowships and Awards

Jackson-Farrell Graduate Fellowship	2025
Bankard Fund for Political Economy Pre-Doctoral Fellowship	2025
Quantitative Collaborative Bynum Grant	2024
Dumas Malone Graduate Research Fellowship	2023
Tipton R. Snavelly Fund Prize for the Best Dissertation Proposal	2023

Research and Other Activities

Student organizer, Bankard Workshop in Development Economics, University of Virginia	2024-2025
Quantitative Collaborative Graduate Student Affiliate	2023-2025
Research Assistant to Professor Sandip Sukhtankar, University of Virginia	2019-2020
Research Assistant to Professor Sheetal Sekhri, University of Virginia	2017-2019

Professional Service

Referee for *Journal of Public Economics*, *Journal of Law and Economics*, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*

References

Sheetal Sekhri	Sandip Sukhtankar	Kerem Coşar
Professor	Professor	Professor
Dept. of Economics	Dept. of Economics	Dept. of Economics
University of Virginia	University of Virginia	University of Virginia
ssekhri@virginia.edu	srs8yk@virginia.edu	kerem.cosar@virginia.edu